

## **Kafi: A Genre of Punjabi Poetry**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Kafi is a prominent genre of Punjabi literature and is very rich in form and content. This article deals with the etymology, connotation and definition of Kafi with its literary and cultural background and the atmosphere in which it flourished, so as to have a better concept of it. It also includes a commentary on the Punjabi writers of Kafi, classical as well as the poets coming after the creation of Pakistan. It is a tribute to the talent which has gone into creative efforts of the five hundred years of the tradition of Kafi, which is the pride of this region. The article also points to the avenues which Kafi has opened to the new poets.

What is the etymology of Kafi? What is its historical background? The researchers have divergent views on it. Let us first take the opinion of the scholars and intellectuals. Dr. Nazir Ahmed (1979) observes,

“Kafi is a Thath and a raga of music. Now since the Qawwals sing Kafis, therefore it is believed that it is called Kafi because it is in some way related to the Kafi raga. This may not be wrong but some objections have been raised against it. First, you may sing a Kafi in any raga (may be Bherwein). On the contrary, the same Kafi can be sung in every raga. In other words, there is no definite relationship between raga and Kafi. Thus, if no such relationship exists, then why are, these five lines poems called Kafi, not Asavrian and Holian?

“One argument that is forwarded in relating the poem Kafi with the raga Kafi is that Kafi Thath is the vastest of all ragas and any raga within it and its tunes have always being popular. Among the holy saints, which include Moen-ud-Din, Nizam-ud-Din, Amir Khusro and Bulhe Shah, these have been very popular. Common people are their audience and it is not strange that for the transmission of their poetry they used the most popular raga, Kafi. But there is one thing that goes against it. Many Kafis of Shah Hussain do not fall in the category of Kafi. Jai Jai Vanti, Vodhuns, Kahnra, Dhanasri, are very different from Kafi Thath” (Ahmed, 1979).

Syed Ali Abbass Jalalpuri (1993: 207) writes,

“Kafi is a well known genre of Punjabi poetry, which Shah Hussain has composed in ragas and which Bulhe Shah and Ghulam Farid carried to sublimity. There is a tradition that earlier its name was Kami (related to Kam or sensuality

and love). Which later changed into Kafi. Majority believe that Kafi meant Kamil or perfect. In Indian music Kafi is a raga as well as a Thath” (Puri, 1993: 207).

Muhammad Asif Khan (1989: 24) says,

“One thing is definite, that the F sound in Kafi is not from Sindhi or Punjabi speech. This has been introduced from Persian” (Khan, 1989: 24).

Makhdum Muhammad Zaman Talib-ul-Maula comments,

“The word is actually Qafi (rhyme scheme) related to Kafi, That is rhymed speech. It means the words or sentences which use rhyme” (In Khan, 1989: 24).

Abdul Ghafoor Qureshi (1989: 79) tells us,

“Kafi is in fact a distortion of the word Qavafi in Arabic dictionaries. It has been mentioned as concise poetic composition. But there is no reference to this genre in Arabic literature” (Qureshi, 1989: 79).

Syed Atta Hussain Musvi wrote,

“In Arabic language Kafh means duff (cymbals) to which small bells are attached” (In Khan, 1989: 24).

Sharif Kunjahi (1996: 17-18) notes,

“To read Kafi as rhyme scheme (Qafia) is not correct. In our opinion the real word was Kav. It is called Kafi because in Sindhi and classical Punjabi, the last letter is not a consonant and usually it would have been pronounced with a declining accent” (Kunjahi, 1996: 17-18).

The research scholars have much speculated about the word Kafi. The aforesaid arguments of Muhammad Asif Khan suggest that, this is an Arabic or Persian word. As opposed to this Sharif Kunjahi traces its origin to Kav which is a Sanskrit word. Even before the arrival of Muslims in the Sub-Continent this word was used for poetry. The passage from Kav to Kafi is not improbable. All these scholars are respectable but it is difficult to arrive at a definite conclusion from their writings.

What is the form of Kafi? Is it related to content or form? In this context Dr. Nazir Ahmed opines.

“Kafi is usually a rhymed composition of five or seven and sometimes more verses. At times it has a climatic line. But the content is usually mystical. The term Kafi is generally used with reference to the work of Muslim mystics. For Non-Muslims the word is the Shabd or Ashloka” (Ahmed, 1979).

Muhammad Safdar Mir (1990:175) writes,

“Like Bhajan, in Kafi also, the Rahao or the climatic lines is an essential constituent but while composing a book, for convenience, it is not necessarily repeated after every line or stanza. Even the reader does not care to repeat it and feels that the verses are independent and have no thematic connection” (Mir, 1990:175).

Muhammad Asif Khan (1989) writes,

“All the lines coming after every climatic line in a Kafi, all the lines that follow it have their own autonomous value. But each line gives its full meanings when read with the climatic lines” (p.37).

Both Safdar Mir and Muhammad Asif Khan consider the climatic lines as the distinctive quality of the genre of Kafi. According to Dr Nazir Ahmed, some Kafis have climatic lines and some not, or some Kafis are not well knit and continuous. According to Safdar Mir, when Dr. Nazir raises such objections actually he exposes his ignorance of the technique of Kafi and Bhajan. Kafis have been extensively written in Punjabi. This has made it difficult to assign a subject to it. Neither is it distinguished by its subject. Kafi is a formal genre and its distinctive quality is the climatic lines. Neither the number of lines is fixed nor the subject. Some Kafis have only half a line for the climax. But then it is repeated to make it a complete line. In Shah Hussain’s Kafis the climatic line has been repeated after every line. This is so with most of the Kafis of classical poets. In some of Bulhe Shah Kafis, the climatic line comes after three lines. Actually the meanings of the lines can be understood only with reference to the climatic line. In the light of these definitions of Kafi, many Shabd of Hindu Bhagats are found to be very close to the form of Kafi. Take this example of Bhagat Kabir:

My heart is in turmoil for the absence of my beloved.

Neither is there rest in the day nor sleep in the night.

I remain in torture till dawn.

My heart is in doldrums as if I have been born on a deserted bed.

The eyes are tired and no way is visible,

My cruel lord did not inquire after me.

O Sadho! Kabir says, my pain has greatly tortured me (Oudh, 1990: 293).

Beside Bhagat Kabir other Bhagats have also written Bhajans which come up to the form of Kafi. But the editors of Bhagat Banis have never used the word Kafi for these compositions. Dr. Jit Singh Sital, the editor of the Kalam-e-Nanak, has described the poetry of Nanak under the title of the genres or forms, but Kafi has nowhere been mentioned. However, there is the description of Maru Kafi in the ragas. Dr. Sital has edited this poetry very much according to Guru Granth.

“Here Guru Nanak’s poetry (Bani) is discussed in some details so that the readers may be acquainted with the various aspects of this great creative work. In this elaboration, particular care has been taken that it must be arranged according to the tradition established by Sri Guru Arjan Dev Saheb. Other efforts beside this sometimes may create confusions. Therefore in the following details the order of Bani has followed the ragas, ragnis and the poetic genres as titled by Sri Guru Granth Saheb” (Sital, 1971: 21).

Guru Granth was compiled by Guru Arjan in 1604 (Sital, 1971:4). Guru Arjan (1563-1606) and Shah Hussain (1539-1599) were contemporaries. Even they did not name any poetic creation of Guru Nanak as Kafi. In fact the form of Kafi existed even before the Muslim poets. But the Naths and Bhagati poets called it

Bhajan and Shabd, while the Ismaili pirs use the term Ginan for it. Shah Hussain is the first Punjabi poet who used the term Kafi for this Genre.

There can be no final word about how long the form of Bhajan or Kafi has been in use. But it is most probable that if the Bhajans had been based on Mantras in Vedas, then they would not have been so deeply rooted in the people. Actually it was nourished in the climate of Punjabi, Sindhi and Hindi cultures. Some critics arrive at this conclusion from the similarities of the techniques of Kafi with woman's expression of love. They take it as a derivative of Hindi literature. While Hindi literature was limited to Rasso, even then great classical poets like Baba Farid were creating universal literature in Punjabi. If one has to fall back on conjecture, it may also be claimed that this genres spread to other areas through Naths and Ismaili Pirs of the Punjab. We believe that Kafi and Bhajan are based on the folksongs which have been popular in the Punjab for centuries. Classical poets also based their poetry on folksongs. There is a reflection of folksongs in many Kafis of Shah Hussain. 'oh mamma, of Khaeras don't speak to me' (Ghaffar, 2005: 551).

If such climatic lines are read separately from Kafis, these sound like bridal songs, as if a bride is departing from her father's home. Such examples abound in other classical poets too. It may be that these poetic lines carry in them the melody and the rhythm of folksongs.

In the Punjabi poetry of Guru Nanak (1449-1539) as it exists now, some Shabds are found which are according to the form of Kafi. After Guru Nanak, a significant name is that of Shah Hussain, who wrote in the form of Kafi and extended its dimensions technically as well as intellectually.

After him many poets took it seriously. Among the classical poets Shah Sharaf, Ghulam Hasan Gaman, Khair Shah, Aqil Jogi and Muhammad Bakhsh Nauroz are the most renowned. But there were Shah Hussain, Bulhe Shah, Sachal Sarmast and Khawaja Ghulam Farid who took Kafis to sublimity.

Shah Hussain (1539-1599) is the first recognized writer of Kafi. Folksongs are reflected in his Kafis. On the surface, it looks quite common-place poetry but he has studied the philosophy of life in depth. His other great contribution to Punjabi literature is the use of symbols. His symbols grow from Punjabi culture and these are multidimensional in meanings. This is an intellectual and technical innovation which has exerted great influence on the classical and modern Punjabi poetry. The following Kafi is an illustration of his style.

O Mamma! Who can I tell, this state of separation pain  
Fires of faqeers smoulder, wherever I rummage ruby-red gain  
O Mamma! Who can I tell, this state of separation pain  
Thorns pierce; make me mad, separation my mind's refrain  
O Mamma! Who can I tell, this state of separation pain  
Bread of pain, curry of thorns, from burning bones for obtain  
O Mamma! Who can I tell, this state of separation pain  
Jungles, moors she roams in search, yet not found the swain

O Mamma! Who can I tell, this state of separation pain  
Says Husayn the destitute devote, if he's found, joy I'd attain  
O Mamma! Who can I tell this state of separation pain (Ghaffar, 2005: 783).

Bulhe Shah (1692-1758) comes next. Bulhe Shah has dealt with many subjects but the most prominent in his universal approach is his love for men. He very courageously condemns hypocrisy, mischievousness, greed, jealousy, prejudice and class divisions among men. He carries a message of love for the whole humanity.

Sachal Sarmast (1740-1826) talks of the unity of God, of union and separation and of true love for the real lord and negating one self for God. Khawaja Farid comes last in this tradition of poetry. His poetry has many dimensions and approaches. But in it the philosophy of Wahdat-ul-Wajod, love, separation from divine beloved and descriptions of Rohi frequently appear. In the poetry of Khawaja Farid divine and profane loves go side by side. In his descriptions of nature, he blends the objective and the subjective. When the clouds thunder on the burning Rohi, its noise is very welcome. He related it to the aspiration of the heart. The Pelo pickers are ultimately dyed in the colours of Farid. He has used the symbol of Sassi for separation in love. Very few poets have touched the heights of art as he has.

In the British period Punjabi language had been thrown out of curriculum. As a result the new educated generation has been alienated from its heritage. After the creation of Pakistan some middle class intellectuals started thinking afresh about their language and literature. They arrived at the conclusion that true creative activity is possible only in the mother tongue. They were also fully aware of the fact that in order to put an end to the alienation created by the colonial period, they shall have to come back to their literary heritage. Many poets wrote Kafis in the classical tradition. But they could not rise above it. Kafis have also been written after independence. But the Kafis of Mushtaq Soofi, Ghulam Hussain Sajid, Shahzad Qaiser, Khaqan Haider Ghazi, Rifaat Abbass and professor Sharib have carried this genre forward thematically.

Mushtaq Soofi, in his Kafis in “Haith Vagay Daria” has followed Shah Hussain by repeating every line. He did not bring any change in the form of Kafi but he has based most of his Kafis on the songs of Sandal Bar. Even some of the climatic lines are actually the songs of the Bar. For his metaphor, landscape and romance, he chose the diction of the Bar. He regrets that there is no dearth of resources, but there is barrenness in them use of which there seems to be no end. He dreams of an ideal society in his poetry. The beauty of the Bar, the landscape and the romance have been so blended that his work has attained sublimity.

The first poetic collection of Ghulam Hussain Sajid “Dunia Phiray Ghamazi” includes some Kafis beside other poems. But his “Pani Ramz Bharay” is a book of Kafis which he has named Waee. Waee is the name of a collective prayer which is offered to break the stifling force of cruelty and exploitation, when it reaches its

extreme. Sajid is the Child of the river Ravi. The beauty of the Ravi and the rich culture of the Bar are ingrained in his unconscious. He wishes that the oppression around him ultimately come to an end and a new world blossom. His approach is subjective in this era of ideological poetry. There is a bitter sweet melancholy that runs deep through his poetry and casts a spell over the reader. He draws the landscape of the Ravi in his chaste language. His passion does not burst out in a conflagration rather he keeps this heat under his mature response. It is not a deliberate effort but a spontaneous out-burst which comes out with ease.

Shahzad Qaiser has published four collections of his Kafis. The form and mood of these Kafis is classical. His diction is also very close to that of the Kafi. His Kafi deals with the problems of human existence, the inner barrenness, the relationship between the body and the soul, mortality of man and the blessing of the Murshid. His Kafis fall in the category of subjective poetry.

The two poetic collections of Khaqan Haider Ghazi “Band Gali Vich Sham” and “Dam Dam Nal Dhamal” also include some Kafis. He has described the agony of his own time through an address to Baba Farid, Sultan Bahoo, Lal Qalandur and Bulhe Shah. The great exponent of this style in Punjabi poetry is Shah Hussain who has described the torture of separation through an address to his mother. In modern poetry Amrita Pritam is a big voice that has narrated the massacre of the Partition and the great moral degradation through an address to Waris Shah. This kind of style basically flourishes in a period of intellectual barrenness only when people become callous to the cries of pain. In such a situation the poet address one who has been through such a torture. In the other Kafis of Khaqan which have been addressed to Bulhe Shah, the pain of this age has been concentrated in twenty eight stanzas. He has made his utmost effort to break through this web of torture but to no avail. The agony of time, oppression and cruelty has been so blended in the classical tradition that this Kafi has become the representative genre of this generation.

Rifaat Abbass has published two collections of Kafis “Sangat Veda” and “Ishk Allah Saien Jagia”. Their form is classical. Sangat Veda deals with man from the age of Vedas to the present age. The poet has made the people of this culture aware of the oppression of history. He has also suggested the creation of a new structure on these ideas. In “Ishq Allah Saien Jagia” there are two basic metaphors, Ishq and Allah. Apparently these two are the subjects of classical Kafi. But the poet has so beautifully adjusted these topics to the folk dialect that puts a stamp on his poetic talent. To mould every day attitudes into beautiful verses is his distinction.

A collection of the Kafis of Professor Sharib “Koi Androu Dur Kharkavay” has already been published. The great distinction of his Kafi is that he describes the internal problem of human existence in folk tradition. Separation from the beloved, the pain of deprivation despite labour and the wailings of separation from the beloved are so beautifully blended with the memory of the landscape of the old Punjab that his Kafi becomes a beautiful epitome of form and content. The poet is

looking for a person through whom he may explore the internal possibilities of existence. Despite its ugliness, he does not allow the beauty of life to be absent from his mind. His poetry expresses the feeling of unequal distribution of wealth, deprivation and despair. But the spell of the desire for the beloved turns this ugliness into an aesthetic experience.

The highly conscious poets of the Punjab are trying hard to identify themselves with their literary heritage in order to erase the alienation created by the colonial period. This poetry is much richer than other poetic genre in that it has behind it a classical tradition which is five hundred years old. Its acceptance is a part of Punjab's collective unconscious. The best writers of the present age have chosen it for their creative venture. The contemporary Kafi poets, keeping with the contemporary needs are trying to give a new form to the Punjabi genre in order to secure for it a status in the age of computer. It is a very welcome effort for Punjabi literature.

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